

Nevada
National
Security
Site

Secret Film Studio: Lookout Mountain



The Lookout Mountain facility was a fully self-contained 100,000-square-foot studio overlooking the famous Sunset Strip.



Film crews and photographers prepare to film a nuclear test at the Nevada National Security Site.



Intrepid photographers ventured as close as four miles to the nuclear blasts.

Introduction

In an unassuming building located on Wonderland Avenue, five minutes from the famous Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, California, a secret film studio produced as many films as those of the major Hollywood studios, yet most of those films were unseen by the public. The mission of Lookout Mountain Air Force Station was to provide in-service production of classified motion picture and still photographs to the U.S. Department of Defense and the Atomic Energy Commission - later the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). For 22 years, the Lookout Mountain studio produced millions of feet of classified film and thousands of still photos.

Background

Beginning with Trinity, the very first nuclear test in 1945, there was a need to capture nuclear testing with still and moving pictures to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the behavior of nuclear weapons. The U.S. started filming nuclear tests with the first test series, Operation Crossroads in 1946, with the help of the best talent in the motion picture industry.

State-of-the-art studio

Surrounded by an electrified security fence, the 100,000-square-foot facility on two and a half acres was originally built in 1941 as a World War II air defense center that coordinated radar installations on nearby mountaintops. When the Lookout Mountain Air Force Station film studio was established in 1947, the facility was so surreptitious that even the residents in the area were unaware of what went on within the compound.

The Lookout Mountain Air Force Station studio was comparably equipped to major film studios and possessed:

- One full stage, two screening rooms
- The capability to process 16 mm and 35 mm motion picture film
- Optical printing capabilities
- Still photography laboratory
- Animation and editorial departments
- 17 climate-controlled film vaults
- Support facilities
- Bomb shelter
- Helicopter pad
- Two underground parking garages



In fact, Lookout Mountain Air Force Station was the only self-contained film studio in Hollywood. Staffed by both military and civilian personnel recruited from nearby motion picture studios such as Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, Warner Brothers Studio, and RKO Pictures, Lookout Mountain studio retained more than 250 producers, directors, and cameramen - all cleared to access top secret and restricted data and sworn to secrecy regarding activities at the studio.

Filming at the Nevada National Security Site

The Air Force's 1352nd Photographic Group was based at Lookout Mountain Air Force Station in Hollywood, but photographers were stationed at Mercury - base camp for the Nevada Test Site (NTS), now known as the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS) to capture the images produced by nuclear testing.

Beginning with the first test series, Operation Ranger conducted at the NTS in 1951, photographers from the 1352nd Photographic Group and the U.S. Army Signal Corps began experimenting with different methods of capturing atmospheric nuclear tests on film.

Photographers brought their cameras as close as four miles to the detonations, contending with powerful blast waves and thick dust clouds that would sweep across the desert in the seconds after the tests. To mitigate these obstacles, special bunkers were constructed in the test area vicinities to house remotely-controlled camera equipment. The bunkers afforded a closer vantage point to the detonations and provided protection to the equipment in the wake of wind and dust immediately following the tests.

Photographers also took to the skies, flying in planes directly behind the bombers delivering their nuclear payloads over the NNSS to film from above the detonations. Photographers from the Lookout Mountain studio were responsible for designing special camera housings that could mount directly on aircraft. The results are an enduring, awesome visual documentation of the power and destruction of nuclear weapons.

In addition to historic visual documentation provided by the photos and the filming of nuclear tests, test photography also served scientific purposes. Test yields were determined by several methods, including ground meters, radiochemical analysis, and filming of the detonations by multiple cameras.

Nuclear test film legacy

Nuclear tests were filmed in Cinemascope, stereophonic sound, VistaVision, and even 3-dimensional photography, using all the latest advances in film making. Lookout Mountain studio produced more than 6,500 films for the Atomic Energy Commission, and other government agencies. Many of these films remain classified, but atmospheric test films that are declassified may be viewed at www.nv.doe.gov, or by visiting the U.S. DOE National Nuclear Security Administration Nevada Field Office Public Reading Facility in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Today, Wonderland Avenue residents know little about the secret studio's history, and the Lookout Mountain facility is now a private residence.

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The MET test, photographed by Lookout Mountain photographers on April 15, 1955 at the Nevada National Security Site.